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By Jay Meisel

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TREASURE COAST - A project to provide the first commuter rail service along the Treasure Coast in more than 40 years has cleared its first hurdle, an official said last week.

An application for federal funding was submitted by the Aug. 9 deadline, said Kim DeLaney, a planner with the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council.

The Federal Railroad Administration is expected to announce in late September whether the project will receive funding.

If the funding is approved, Amtrak service from Jacksonville to Miami could begin within three years, Ms. DeLaney said.

Vero Beach, Fort Pierce and Stuart have committed to providing or helping coming up with the 20 percent local/state match to build stations, she said.

Ms. Delaney said she's optimistic that the \$250 million project will be funded.

"We know it's an excellent project," she said.

The application was submitted with more than 160 letters and resolutions in support of it, Ms. DeLaney said.

The biggest hurdles in getting the application submitted on time was getting environmental assessment approvals and completing an agreement between the Florida Department of Transportation and Amtrak, she said.

Both were completed in the last two weeks.

If federal funds are awarded, a design process would begin, followed by construction, repairing tracks and building new stations.

Some final details involving the agreement between the state and Amtrak would still need to be completed, she said.

The Vero Beach station would be located in the city's historic downtown area near the existing historic station.

The Fort Pierce station would be located near Orange Avenue and east of the Florida East Coast Railway tracks.

The Stuart station would be located in the downtown area behind the Martin County Courthouse.

Passenger rail service for the area ended in 1968. The service essentially ended in 1963 after a strike, but resumed in 1965 on a limited basis.

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The Fort Pierce station was torn down on Oct. 28, 1967.

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